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Statements & Speeches

Careers and Markets in the Arts

Notes for an address to the
annual meeting of the
International Council of
Fine Arts Deans,
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It has always been a pleasure for me to come to British Columbia, and to this city, with its extraordinarily beautiful setting. For those of you who may be here for the first time, I hope your meeting schedule will permit you to see something of Vancouver and its spectacular environs.

But there is more to make one feel welcome in this province than its scenery and its gentle climate. British Columbia for some years has enjoyed vigorous activity in the arts, thanks to a talented and dedicated group of people whose work the Canada Council has watched with interest. Given this happy cultural milieu, I was therefore not surprised that the provincial minister of public works, William Hartley, should say last July when he opened the first exhibition of the provincial art collection:

"I believe that Art is an essential ingredient to all societies. It nourishes the spirit, it generates a wholesome evolution of 'Man' and it celebrates life. Art and Humanity are one. It is a sensitizing process and I believe we should all have the opportunity to share it. Artists are, therefore, important people in our society."

It is on behalf of these "important people", that you and I are meeting here, and about whose pressing problems I wish to speak. Most of you come from the United States, and you may or may not be fully aware of the rather troubled situation in the arts in Canada -- though both our countries are suffering through a period of economic uncertainty, which may be expected to have concomitant effects in the arts. In Canada we are experiencing the mixed blessing of an explosion

of interest in the arts on the one hand, and no parallel increase in hard cash support on the other. The problems created by soaring costs in every form of artistic activity, plus the increasing expectations of all citizens that they have a right of access to the arts, or to self-expression through the arts, are still not clearly understood. For artists, the juxtaposition of the two phenomena has created market and career problems that cannot be ignored.

If most of my examples in this talk are chosen from the visual arts it is because it is there that the problems are most acute. The visual arts are particularly adaptable and receptive to individual creative activity. But they are the most difficult in which to pursue a professional career. Furthermore, we seldom talk about the visual arts in "career" and "market" terms.

Your chairman invited me here to talk about the Canada Council, so it is from the Council's point of view that I shall talk about careers and markets in the arts. First, a word about the Council.

We were created by the Parliament of Canada in 1957, as an independent body responsible for promoting the arts, humanities and social sciences. Our funds come from three sources: an annual grant from Parliament, income from an original \$50 million endowment, and a few substantial gifts and bequests. We are self-governing, and have the final say in the disbursement of these funds. The Council itself is a decision-making body of 21 appointed by the federal government. It includes people from many professions and is generally representative of all parts of Canada.

Like the United States' National Endowment for the Arts, Canada Council grant programs are directed both to arts organizations and to individuals. Applications for grants are assessed by qualified advisers and brought to the national council for review. There is a significant difference between the two bodies, however. Canada has not been as fortunate as the United States in having substantial support for the arts from large foundations and individual patrons, so the Canada Council has a large program of sustaining grants to major performing arts and other organizations.

This year, we have at our disposal some \$35 million to support the arts. Though the amount is significant, the needs are far greater than the available funds. One example will suffice. We think there are about 3,000 professional painters, sculptors and print-makers in this country, but there is virtually no solid market for their work. Many are fine artists, yet their work sells very poorly. In all, last year, we were able to assist only 244 of these deserving people through our grants. This example could be duplicated for each one of the arts fields in which we are active.

Here are some detailed figures, for the year 1974-75. In the visual arts, our grants totalled \$2.4 million, and went to the 244 individual artists of whom I've spoken, and to 70 organizations, mainly art galleries. I must explain that our grants to individuals comprise senior arts grants for artists who are well into their careers, short-term arts grants for those at the threshold of their careers, travel grants and project cost grants.

In film, video and photography, we distributed a total of \$1.4 million to 118 individuals and 27 organizations, and to 88 additional production and video exchange projects. In writing, publication and translation, we paid out \$3.3 million to 137 individuals, 113 publishers and other organizations, 56 literary and arts periodicals, and 72 translation projects. This amount also included support for literary readings and bulk purchases of books for free distribution. In music and opera, we gave \$4.6 million to 183 individuals and 107 organizations; in theatre, \$4.8 million to 105 individuals and 70 organizations; in dance, \$2.3 million to 54 individuals and 17 organizations.

In addition to direct grants to individuals and organizations, the Canada Council is involved in marketing the arts in two relatively new areas: the Art Bank and the Touring Office.

For a five-year period beginning in 1972, we have been granted \$5 million by the federal government to buy works of art for the Art Bank from practising Canadian artists. At about \$1 million a year, this possibly represents one-quarter of the entire market for their work. Thus we are, in effect, one of the biggest buyers of contemporary Canadian art. To date, with an expenditure of close to \$3.2 million, we have been able to assist in this fashion some 675 individual artists. The goal of the program is not to build up a collection that will repose in art galleries. The pieces are rented to federal government

departments and agencies for use in their offices and public places. Contrary to the popular myth that the public is indifferent to contemporary art, there has been great interest in these works. In less than two years (since renting began), we have rented about half the collection, or about 2,700 pieces, and rentals are increasing. We feel sure that when the initial five-year period is up the government will continue its support.

Our Touring Office is responsible for providing management and counselling services for tours of professional Canadian artists and performing companies in Canada and abroad. This operation has no counterpart in the United States, though there are some state-run touring offices in European countries, including the Soviet Union (our climate is not the only thing we share with the Soviet Union!). Canada is a country of vast physical size and small population, strung out for thousands of miles like "a necklace of city states set in the tundra", to quote a former federal cabinet minister, Maurice Sauvé. It is therefore extremely difficult for sponsors and performing arts groups and individuals to get together. A sponsor in Vancouver, for example, might have to get in touch with an impresario in New York to book a Montreal dance company. We have attempted to change all that by providing information about Canadian performing artists and companies. We make available subsidies, technical assistance and support services to encourage and coordinate touring and to make artistic performances accessible to a wider audience.

Our principal "partners in service" in providing over-all support to the arts are of course the provincial governments. Most provinces contribute substantial amounts of money and encourage in many other ways the growth of the arts in their regions. Although the recent annual report of the United States' National Endowment says there has been "heartening and sometimes dramatic growth in appropriations for state arts agencies", I think it is interesting to note that the per capita level of contributions to the arts in half the provinces of Canada exceeds that in individual states, with the exception of New York.

It is obvious that we are rapidly growing accustomed to more and more massive public funding in the arts, without in any way seeing this strong state role as compromising the independence and creativity of our artists or the quality of the work they produce. Some artists and arts administrators may argue with me, of course.

"Art must serve the people", the late Dmitri Shostakovitch wrote, in his last letter to the Canadian organizers of World Music Week, which we are now celebrating. We do not have to espouse Shostakovitch's political philosophy to support his dictum. But in our countries, many of us would instinctively couple it with another: "The people must support the arts".

The problem is, of course, that people are not giving financial support in any way that ensures artists a decent living and reasonable security for the future.

As I stated at the outset, there has been a veritable explosion of interest in the arts in the past decade. Max Wyman of the Vancouver Sun declared when we released our report last year on the work of 29 performing arts organizations between 1966 and 1972: "Canada's cultural renaissance is under way!" Mr. Wyman then pointed out that the total paid attendance for the 29 organizations we studied, at 4.2 million in 1972, topped that of the combined attendance at the home games of our three National Hockey League teams and our nine Canadian Football League teams, at 4.1 million.

Sitting where I do, reading news and feature stories from across the country, the reports of our arts officers, and the massive agendas of our Council meetings which record the flood of applications for funds, I am well aware that there is burgeoning interest in the arts. In the United States, too, I note that applications to the National Endowment for the Arts more than doubled in a year.

But the lack of money to satisfy present expectations, plus the uncertainty of sufficient government funding to meet all needs in the future, has serious implications, not only for artists and arts organizations but also for the fine arts faculties and students in our universities.

The number of fine arts faculties has been expanding rapidly in recent years. In Canada we are relatively new to the field. Scarcely two decades ago many of our aspiring artists who wanted a university education in the practising arts had to go elsewhere. Today, the latest edition of the handbook Universities and Colleges of Canada lists 18 Canadian universities that offer

professional degrees in the fine arts. I trust this expansion will continue, even with the general financial squeeze on universities in both our countries. In fact, the publication I have just mentioned declares confidently that "Canada has the resources to expand, to experiment, to innovate in the vital area of higher education . . ."

However, the question is inevitably posed, when we consider the increasing number of graduates who are pouring from our university fine arts faculties (and from our conservatories and art schools), how will they be employed? I have already referred to the Canada Council's inability to support more than a fraction of the artists that this country is producing. Are you all, therefore, churning out more and more artists who will need bailing out of their financial difficulties when their dreams of acceptance by the art-loving populace are dashed? Artists who will swamp us with more requests for grants? Who will (heaven forbid!) make my job more difficult?

This, as I see it, is a vexing problem for a Dean of Fine Arts today. What seems to be happening, in Canada at least, is that we shall soon be developing young artists in our fine arts faculties on a scale (and at a cost) that our economy cannot support. We are helping to professionalize creative talent, but we are sending these new professionals out into a market that in many instances simply isn't there. The young person may have an easier time in the performing arts -- though the actor who must struggle along on an Equity pay scale of \$95 a week (when he is working) might disagree strongly. But we have no comparable point of entry to the market for the professional in the visual arts. Unless of course he wants

to teach. Universities and schools certainly are becoming significant employers of artists. But one gets the feeling that at least some artists do not teach by choice, and that a Canada Council grant may seem to be not so much a rescue from financial hardship as from the common room. By that I do not mean to slight artist-teachers -- such as Arthur Lismer, B.C. Binning, and Earle Birney -- who have done splendid work in the universities.

Encouraging an artist-in-training to set his sights on an arts-related career, rather than on the full-time practice of his art, is not a welcome task, I know. But when students themselves may express misgivings about employment possibilities or begin to look in other directions -- and I am told this happens -- perhaps there is merit in helping them examine other careers. In the visual arts, for example, perhaps our universities, in encouraging students to be inventive in the images they make, have been less inventive in preparing students to place these images in media other than in traditional galleries and museums. Work in the electronic media, collaboration with architects and urban designers -- these are fields full of unsolved problems today. Along the same lines, in Canada certainly, we do not suffer from a glut of qualified arts administrators and animators, museum people or critics, whose work demands a high degree of creativity.

When all that has been said, I am convinced we shall still have substantial numbers of gifted people coming out of our universities who should be given a chance to become practitioners of their chosen art.

How can we give them at least a fighting chance to make a living at their art?

We have become sceptical, through long experience, of how much the average citizen will permit increased subsidies to the arts, through his tax money. But it is true, surely, that greater understanding is the path to acceptance. In the long run, I am confident that a higher level of public acceptance will both improve the quality of work in the arts and increase the number of artists that our society will support. Surveys indicate that there is already widespread acceptance of the notion of public support for the arts. The recent report, The Audience for the Performing Arts, which is a study of attendance patterns in Ontario, points out that 51 per cent of respondents who were regular attenders at artistic performances thought it was important that tax funds be spent to have theatre facilities easily accessible. What is perhaps more surprising, 31 per cent of non-attenders also considered the expenditure of tax funds for this purpose to be important.

If this support from the public is forthcoming, we do not look for all of it to be centred in the Canada Council. On the contrary, we have stated repeatedly that we believe in partnership in funding. I have already mentioned the role of the provinces, with their provincial agencies; municipalities, too, are increasing their support. Corporate interest is being encouraged through the newly formed Council for Business and the Arts in Canada. Its goal is to step up corporate contributions to at least \$35 million a year by 1980.

However, even with these new (and still uncertain) sources of funding, I do not see that our present economic structure can ensure a decent and adequate living for all artists without our developing new opportunities of employment for artists and new ways to distribute their art.

I have been doing some arithmetic. If we look at, for example, the roughly 3,000 professionals in the visual arts in Canada, we would have to develop a visual arts market of some \$75 million a year to support their work fully. Perhaps this is not totally unrealistic, but it is a long way from the \$4 million to \$5 million market we have today. In addition, I should not be surprised if, as a result of the increasing numbers of graduates from university fine arts faculties, we should have in a few years 5,000 painters, sculptors and print-makers -- all with claims on the market, all expecting to make a living in their chosen field.

In the short run, it looks as though we at the Canada Council must continue to be selective, and to choose from among the hundreds of applicants for grants the one in five artists whom our juries recommend most strongly. And we shall have to live with the problems inherent in the selective process, which is as open as we can make it.

In the longer run, for the reasons I have suggested, the situation will no doubt improve. But I expect, really, that our market-oriented economy, even with these props from public and private sources, will never be able to provide a decent living for all its artists.

Let us look more broadly, beyond the immediate concerns of the arts community, at the guaranteed income proposals that have frequently been advanced during the Canadian government's current review of social security. I understand that, under a universal type of scheme, every adult would be assured an income by government. I am also told that what our government planners are probably going to recommend in fact is some kind of income supplement for specific groups. I do not know, of course, how this will apply to artists. But I am sure you will agree with me that government planners must include artistic activity among those forms of low-paid work that should be supported, without stigma, in this affluent society.

Although some people may still think an income guarantee encourages idleness, I think the facts prove the contrary. The experiments in Manitoba and Ontario are too young to yield results. But I am told that experiments in New Jersey have shown that a well-designed guaranteed income program encourages people to work.

In my opinion, such a guarantee would have two important and salutary effects for the working artist. (a) The young and beginning artist, whose material needs are often not great, would receive at least a basic subsistence income during the period in which (if he is a visual artist) he may be developing new techniques, building up a body of work for his first show, visiting artists in other parts of the country, or making the rounds of prospective dealers. (b) The mature, self-employed artist whose work may suffer swings in popular taste or who may be temporarily "dried up", and who does not have the advantage of pension schemes and the like, would have a cushion of income for any emergency period.

But even if we guarantee that everyone who has artistic gifts shall at least have a subsistence income to allow him to produce, we still have the problem of distribution, consumption, or enjoyment by the public of this art. For it is axiomatic that the artist needs an audience, and that the public should have access to his art.

There are many means at our disposal to ensure this access. There are, for example, vast commercial and public radio and television networks, with their school programs, universities-of-the-air, and (in Canada) northern and minority group services. We have the National Film Board; the school system; community colleges with their community outreach programs; university extension courses; community cable broadcasting, and so on. Much could be done to encourage increased use by artists of these facilities and services, and of others that may be developed in the future.

In other words, we shall all have to be more inventive. And if we fail, we may find ourselves faced with a number of unpleasant consequences -- such as rationing the number of people who may enter schools of art, pressing artists to accept uncongenial employment in fields other than their own, or being confronted with large numbers of unemployed, frustrated, alienated artists who, instead of contributing to the quality of life will only add to the many problems of our society.

This, as I see it, is as much a challenge to university fine arts faculties as it is to governments and public agencies.

Governments are attempting to build a better, more equitable society. You are helping to form the young people who will be the artists, the citizens, the leaders of that society.

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